

# Perpetrators of Domestic Violence

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This section presents common characteristics and behavioral tactics of perpetrators, indicators of dangerousness, and relevant parenting issues.

### Who Is a Perpetrator of Domestic Violence?

As is the case with victims of domestic violence, abusers can be anyone and come from every age, sex, socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, occupational, educational, and religious group. They can be teenagers, college professors, farmers, counselors, electricians, police officers, doctors, clergy, judges, and popular celebrities. Perpetrators are not always angry and hostile, but can be charming, agreeable, and kind. Abusers differ in patterns of abuse and levels of dangerousness. While there is not an agreed upon universal psychological profile, perpetrators do share a behavioral profile that is described as “an ongoing pattern of coercive control involving various forms of intimidation, and psychological and physical abuse.”

While many people think violent and abusive people are mentally ill, research shows that perpetrators do not share a set of personality characteristics or a psychiatric diagnosis that distinguishes them from people who are not abusive. There are some perpetrators who suffer from psychiatric problems, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or psychopathology. Yet, most do not have psychiatric illnesses, and caution is advised in attributing mental illness as a root cause of domestic violence. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychological Association (DSM-IV) does not have a diagnostic category for perpetrators, but mental

illness should be viewed as a factor that can influence the severity and nature of the abuse.

Examples of the most prevalent behavioral tactics by perpetrators include:

- *Abusing power and control.* The perpetrator's primary goal is to achieve power and control over their intimate partner. In order to do so, perpetrators often plan and utilize a pattern of coercive tactics aimed at instilling fear, shame, and helplessness in the victim. Another part of this strategy is to change randomly the list of "rules" or expectations the victim must meet to avoid abuse. The abuser's incessant degradation, intimidation, and demands on their partner are effective in establishing fear and dependence. It is important to note that perpetrators may also engage in impulsive acts of domestic violence and that not all perpetrators act in such a planned or systematic way.

- *Having different public and private behavior.* Usually, people outside the immediate family are not aware of and do not witness the perpetrator's abusive behavior. Abusers who maintain an amiable public image accomplish the important task of deceiving others into thinking they are loving, "normal," and incapable of domestic violence. This allows perpetrators to escape accountability for their violence and reinforces the victims' fears that no one will believe them.

- *Projecting blame.* Abusers often engage in an insidious type of manipulation that involves blaming the victim for the violent behavior. Such perpetrators may accuse the victim of "pushing buttons" or "provoking" the abuse. By diverting attention to the victim's actions, the perpetrator avoids taking responsibility for the abusive behavior. In addition to projecting blame on the victim, abusers also may project blame on circumstances, such as making the excuse that alcohol or stress caused the violence.

- *Claiming loss of control or anger problems.* There is a common belief that domestic violence is a result of poor impulse control or anger management problems. Abusers

routinely claim that they “just lost it,” suggesting that the violence was an impulsive and rare event beyond control. Domestic violence is not typically a singular incident nor does it simply involve physical attacks. It is a deliberate set of tactics where physical violence is used to solidify the abuser’s power in the relationship. In reality, only an estimated 5 to 10 percent of perpetrators have difficulty with controlling their aggression. Most abusers do not assault others outside the family, such as police officers, coworkers, or neighbors, but direct their abuse toward the victim or children. This distinction challenges claims that they cannot manage their anger.

- *Minimizing and denying the abuse.* Perpetrators rarely view themselves or their actions as violent or abusive. As a result, they often deny, justify, and minimize their behavior. For example, an abuser might forcibly push the victim down a flight of stairs, then tell others that the victim tripped. Abusers also rationalize serious physical assaults, such as punching or choking, as “self-defense.” Abusers who refuse to admit they are harming their partner present enormous challenges to persons who are trying to intervene. Some perpetrators do acknowledge to the victim that the abusive behavior is wrong, but then plead for forgiveness or make promises of refraining from any future abuse. Even in situations such as this, the perpetrator commonly minimizes the severity or impact of the abuse.

It is equally important to acknowledge that abusers also possess positive qualities. There are abusers who are remorseful, accept responsibility for their violence, and eventually stop their abusive behavior. Perpetrators are not necessarily “bad” people, but their abusive behavior is unacceptable. Some perpetrators have childhood histories where they were physically or sexually abused, neglected, or exposed to domestic abuse. Some suffer from substance abuse and mental health problems. All of these factors can influence their psychological functioning and contribute to the complexity and

severity of the abusive behavior. Perpetrators need support and intervention to end their violent behavior and any additional problems that compound their abusive behavior. Through specialized interventions, community services, and sanctions, some abusers can change and become nonviolent.

### **Indicators of Dangerousness**

Different levels of violence and types of abuse are perpetrated by domestic violence offenders. Some abusers rarely use physical violence, while others assault their partners daily. There are perpetrators who are only abusive towards family members and others who are violent toward a variety of people. There are abusers who are more likely to inflict serious injury or become homicidal. Some frequently degrade the victim, while some rarely, if ever, implement that particular tactic.

It is critical that professionals and community service providers who intervene in domestic violence cases engage in thorough and continuous assessment of the perpetrator's level of dangerousness. Evaluating this dangerousness involves identifying risk indicators that reflect the capacity to continue perpetrating severe violence. Although domestic violence homicides or severe assaults cannot be predicted, there are several risk factors that help determine the likelihood that severe forms of violence may be imminent. The greater the number or the intensity of the following indicators, the more likely a severe or life-threatening attack will occur:

- *Threats or thoughts of homicide and suicide;*
- *Possession or access to weapons;*
- *Use of weapons in a threatening or intimidating manner;*
- *Extreme jealousy or obsession with the victim;*
- *Physical attacks, verbal threats, and stalking during a separation or divorce;*
- *Kidnapping or hostage taking;*
- *Sexual assault or rape;*

- *Prior abusive incidents that resulted in serious injury;*
- *History of violence with previous partners and children;*
- *Psychopathology or substance abuse.*

The above factors pose a substantial risk to victims of domestic violence and possibly to their children. It also is important to ask for the victim's assessment of the abuser's dangerousness. Extremely dangerous perpetrators can be safety threats to people who are involved in the victim's life, individuals trying to help, or the children. It is crucial that community professionals who work with violent families incorporate these risk indicators into their assessments and interventions because failure to do so can seriously compromise the lives of everyone involved.

### **Parenting and the Perpetrator**

Can perpetrators be supportive parents when they are abusive towards the other parent? An emerging issue facing victims of domestic violence and child advocacy groups is the role and impact that perpetrators have in their children's lives. There are perpetrators who have positive interactions with their children, provide for their physical and financial needs, and are not abusive towards them. There also are perpetrators who neglect or physically harm their children. Although abusers vary tremendously in parenting styles, there are some behaviors common among perpetrators that can have harmful effects on children:

**Authoritarianism.** Perpetrators can be rigid and demanding with their children. They often have high and unrealistic expectations and expect children to obey without question or resistance. This parenting style is intimidating for children and alters their sense of safety around the abuser. These perpetrators are more likely to use harsher forms of physical discipline, which can make the children increasingly vulnerable to becoming direct targets of violence.

**Neglect, irresponsibility, and lack of involvement.** Some

abusers are infrequently involved in the daily parenting activities of their children. They may view their children as hindrances and become easily annoyed with them. Furthermore, the perpetrator's preoccupation with controlling the partner and meeting his or her own emotional needs leaves little time to engage the children. Unfortunately, the perpetrator's physical and emotional unavailability can produce unrequited feelings of anticipation and fondness in the children who eagerly await attention.

**Undermining the victim.** The perpetrator's coercive and violent behavior towards the victim sometimes sends children a message that it is acceptable for them to treat that parent in the same manner. More overt tactics that weaken the victim's influence over the children include the perpetrator disregarding the victim's parenting decisions, telling the children that the victim is an inadequate parent, and belittling the victim in the presence of the children. Being victimized by abuse can lead children to perceive the parent in a weaker, passive role with no real authority over their lives.

**Self-centeredness.** Some perpetrators use their children to meet their own emotional needs. Perpetrators may expect their children to be immediately available only when they are interested and often overwhelm them with their problems. This can result in children feeling burdened and responsible for helping their parent while their own needs are neglected.

**Manipulation.** To gain power in the home, perpetrators may manipulate their children into aligning against the victim. Abusers may make statements or exhibit behaviors that confuse the children regarding who is responsible for the violence and coerce them into believing that they are the preferable parent. Abusers also may directly or indirectly use their children to control and intimidate the victim. Perpetrators sometimes may threaten to abduct, seek sole custody of, or physically harm the children if the victim is not compliant.

Sometimes these are threats exclusively and the abuser does not intend or really want to carry out the action, but the threats are typically perceived as being very real.

Children's perception of the perpetrator's violence can play a significant role in the nature of their relationship. Children often feel anxious, scared, and angry when they witness abuse. At the same time, many children also feel affection, loyalty, and love for the abuser. It is common for children to experience ambivalent feelings towards the abuser and this can be difficult for them to resolve.

Domestic violence can influence the children's feelings toward the victim. Many children know the abuse is wrong and may even feel responsible for protecting the battered parent. Yet, they also experience confusion and resentment towards the victim for "putting up" with the abuse and are more likely to express their anger towards the victim rather than directly at the perpetrator.

Children need additional support as they struggle with their conflicting feelings towards the perpetrator. The responsibility of perpetrators as parents primarily focuses on preventing the recurrence of the violence. Some victims want their children to have a safe and positive relationship with the perpetrator, and some children crave that connection.